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Loss and Joy: 15 Years after 9/11

Where were you on this day 15 years ago?

Some of our children and young people were not yet born to see those surreal and chilling images from lower Manhattan, Washington and the fields of rural Pennsylvania of that unforgettable day.

I was just about to leave our home in suburban Maryland, just 10 miles from the White House, for a meeting at the National Cathedral. I never made that meeting. We would pull our children out of school by noon and spend the rest of the day watching the unbelievable images on the television. We gathered with friends that evening to process what just happened and to grieve. In the skies we heard the sound of fighter jets patrolling.

Events such as 9/11 attacks led to much introspection, soul-searching and analysis. Did the nation change? Did we change? Did the world grow smaller and scarier? Was it, for a new generation, our Pearl Harbor moment, when the worlds' horrors revisited and reached our shores? We would never travel by plane in the same way. We have been on a war footing ever since. Like any trauma, we carried on with our lives. We had no choice. We went back to school and work.

What has been gained in the 15 years since? More importantly, what has been lost if not forgotten?

Today's readings square up for us to take a hard look at the pain of losing something we value – security, innocence, trust, respect, peace – and the joy and relief of being reunited and finding something and someone again.

Paul, the writer of most of the New Testament, is the poster child for turnaround stories and proof of why Christians are wired to not give up on people and throw away the key. In his own words he tells the world of his journey. (1 Timothy 1:12-17) I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy... the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love. In me Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

Paul foreshadowed and channeled the hymn Amazing Grace: "Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that sav'd a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Paul was the lost sheep and the lost coin of our gospel story from Luke all wrapped up into one. He serves as an eternal reminder to anyone who does not believe that people can change and turn their lives around. The thief can stop stealing. The deadbeat can begin paying. The walled off can begin letting others in. The carefree and careless can really start caring for things and people beside themselves. The wanderer can return. The broken and the wounded beyond repair can find healing.

And when they do, with the grace and help of God, some even point heavenward and give God thanks as playing a part in the awakening and the turn-around. And when all of this happens: life is good. The cosmic table gets reset.

Our gospel story of the traveling Jesus, making his way towards Jerusalem, gathering crowds and teaching them along the way, hammers home today's story about lost-ness and joy. One lost sheep out of 100 is returned and all is right again. One lost coin out of 10 is found after turning the house upside down.

Luke's gospel will round out this trilogy of lost-ness and joy with a story about a lost prodigal son who is greeted with great joy by his father when he returns from an almost wasted life.

Today's formula is simple: The lost are searched for. The lost are found. The lost are returned. Let the joy and party begin.

And we are invited to see ourselves as the lost sheep and coin even though we may feel like we're the responsible ones being left behind as God fusses over all those "other" sinners and needy people. We stew a bit in our "how about me" tears.

I always find these parables unsettling because I go back and forth feeling like I'm in the group of the 99 sheep and 9 coins – and then feeling a bit lost and forgotten as the one out on his own.

When I feel claimed and safe within a group, I find easier than I would like to admit to resent all the fuss made over those who wander off. I find I get angry at times when I hear about irresponsible hikers and skiers who ignore warnings and go into dangerous places, find themselves in harms' way, and then call in first responders to rescue them. I get cross when I hear about the few people who decide to stay in their homes during storms and fires after they were told to evacuate, and then put others at risk to pluck them from roofs or flooded out homes.

It's hard, isn't it? To forever cut ourselves off from those who are part of the whole.

The following is my personal view, so it is not gospel. Hindsight, as the expression goes, is 20/20. Out of the trauma of the 9/11 attacks 15 years ago today, our nation – perhaps out of grief, shock, retaliation, and sadness – began down a path that we are finding harder and harder to get off.

We pray for our leaders so they will have the wisdom to know how best to respond to evil without losing the soul of a nation. Without forfeiting our values. Do we fight fire with fire? Or as Gandhi famously said: "An eye for eye only ends up making the whole world blind."

God's grace, after all, invites the blind to see again.

So, on a somber day in our history, people of the Resurrection look forward in the light of hope.

May this day serve as a reminder and a wake up call. Each one of us is part of God's unfolding creation. We are valued and loved more than we can ever imagine. And there is dancing and joy in heaven when we too see that we are the lost, the broken, and the rejected – so that we become more searching, merciful and forgiving.